

How to keep it simple and become a better business partner



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At the US Emmys in August this year, Benedict Cumberbatch won the lead actor award for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes. Martin Freeman won best supporting actor for his portrayal of Watson.

The success of both the characters, and the men that now portray them, is down in part to the great relationship they share. They trust each other with a mutual respect that nods to the fact that they both appreciate they are stronger together than apart. Award titles aside, they genuinely share the lead.

We use sharing the lead and being a true peer to describe the pinnacle of business partnering in finance & HR. Both functions are increasingly centralizing transactions & specialist services, leaving business partners embedded in the business unit to build relationships and influence.

It all sounds great in principle, but all too often the reality is anything but. Finance and HR professionals are often promoted to senior roles based on their functional excellence. When asked to 'partner' commercial leaders, they can often find themselves lacking some of the key skills.

Here are our 10 tips to give you and your team a head start:

1. Keep it simple. I quickly learned in sales that if you can't get your message across in 3 minutes, then your message isn't strong enough. In a grocery store a brand has just 3 seconds to grab the attention of a shopper. How then do we expect a 20-slide presentation full of facts and figures to effectively get a message across? Yet that's what most finance and HR partners do. *Top tip: Ask yourself, how would I explain this to a 7 year old child? It will transform the influence you have with your partners, and you will become a go-to person overnight.*

2. Get emotional. Logical arguments are just not enough to gain influence. Appeal to emotional drivers by showing your partners how they and their teams will personally benefit from the suggestions you make. *Top tip: Rather than telling your partners what's in it for you or 'the business', show them what's in it for them.*

3. Listen deeply: The very best partners ask great questions and then listen deeply to the answers. Listening uncovers your partners' real needs, and this is the key to influencing them. *Top tip: Commit yourself to the conversation by turning off the little voice in your head that is thinking about the next clever thing you can say when your partner takes a breath.*

4. Be curious: Questions have the power to ignite the imagination, show people a different path, and generate new thinking – both for you and your partner. Great partners generate almost all their influence with the right question at the right time. *Top tip: Avoid starting questions with what, and never start with why. For the next 30 days start every question with 'how' and begin to notice how positively your partners react. Instead of saying 'why did you do that', say 'how did you decide to take that decision'. Not only will you build a strong relationship with your partner, you'll learn more about how they make decisions. You can use this to influence them better in the future.*

5. Be adaptable. Defining your role and responsibilities is important, but be prepared to adapt to your partners' needs. Be aware of cultural and geographical differences, and adapt accordingly to get the best results.

Top tip: Be prepared to share the lead one day, advise the next, and even analyse data another. Don't be surprised if you do all three in one day, it's all part of the fun.

6. Be true to yourself. The question I am asked the most is who to be loyal to: your partner or your function? Always stand up for what you personally believe in. You'll never please everyone, and sometimes you'll make mistakes. But you'll always be respected. *Top tip: Never be a mouthpiece for someone else, your partners and function alike will see through it and you'll lose credibility.*

7. Win the war. A great way to build some trust fast is to give up some battles to win the war. Always retain your professional integrity, but letting a few low risk items go under the radar will build trust and pay dividends when you are looking to challenge the big stuff. *Top Tip: Avoid being critical or pedantic, and stay positive. Your role as a partner is to help find solutions to problems and challenges, so embrace them.*

8. Walk the walk. Understanding your partner's world can help you to pre-empt their challenges. In sales, ask to visit customers with your partners. In marketing, join consumer insight sessions. In supply chain, work a shift in the factory or warehouse. *Top tip: Someone joined my team and worked 3 shifts in the factory before looking at a single number. They were the most influential business partner the supply chain ever had.*

9. Prioritise better. The number one excuse I hear from business partners is that they don't have time. Rather than allowing your team to use this excuse, invest in some quality time management & prioritization training. *Top tip: Test out these simple rules around email*

for just 30 days, and see how much time you save. First, stop using the reply to all button. Second, stop replying to emails you were cc'd on.

10. Be available and present. Sales, marketing and supply chain do not stop for month end, or capability review time. When your partner phones you or needs your help, take the call and make time for them. Better still, physically sit with your partners every day. *Top tip: relationships take time, so turn your computer off for an hour a day and use the time to speak with your partners. Watch your relationships take off.*

The number one skill I used to become a great partner was to keep it simple. To do that I prioritised so I had time to walk the walk with my partners, and be there when they needed me. I stopped being the pedantic accountant and concentrated on the 'big stuff', never compromising my integrity. I learned to adapt, ask the right questions, and listen deeply to uncover the emotional needs of my partners. And I played it all back to them in 3 slides or less. Sounds simple, but it took me 10 years to master.

Becoming a true peer ultimately means building trust, and that takes time. Watson may have started as a sounding board for Holmes's genius. But over time his carefully crafted questions, just at the right time, became a crucial part of Holmes's methodology. Watson's attention to detail and incisive mind enabled Holmes to quickly eliminate possibilities and focus on the right areas. Holmes trusted Watson, and he listened to him. Holmes made better decisions, and became the most famous detective in the World. And Watson became the second most famous detective in the world.

Andy Shambrook, founder and head of commercial, We Are Adapt Ltd (weareadapt.co.uk) on behalf of ICAEW Leadership and Executive Development (icaew.com/leadership). ICAEW offers a range of Finance Business Partnering resources. **To download a copy of the latest report, go to www.icaew.com\FBPreport**

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